

UNION HYDRAULICS

The Organisation

Union Hydraulics is a small company employing 24 staff in East Gippsland, Victoria. Union Hydraulics services the hydraulic and pneumatic industry, customising hydraulic units and cylinders as well as installing, commissioning and maintaining systems across the industry. Typical work tasks include sedentary office work, customer service, dispatching and receiving goods, driving forklifts and repairing hydraulics systems. Hydraulic technicians are required to work in a range of body positions, including standing, squatting, bending, twisting and accessing awkward spaces.

Key Initiatives and Achievements

Union Hydraulics developed the 'We Care and Prepare' toolkit which is designed to make the return to work process as simple as possible and easily understood by both the worker and the doctor. The 'Body Positions' information sheet contains photos of workers completing typical tasks. It provides a snapshot of what the worker was doing when the injury occurred and assists doctors determine what movements and role an injured worker's is capable of on their return to work. By assisting doctors to make decisions regarding a workers' fitness for different tasks, the company has reduced lost time over the past two years.

Major Themes

Management and staff at Union Hydraulics agree that all employees share the same commitment to injury prevention and rehabilitation. The importance of health and safety and return to work has become ingrained in the workplace. The 'We Care We Prepare' toolkit is an example of this commitment. The success of the toolkit supports Safe Work Australia's finding that adequate information provided by employers to injured workers significantly contributes to successful return to work outcomes (SWA, 2014).

Return to Work must become part of the organisational culture

Union Hydraulics is passionate about the safety of its workers, with a focus on prevention and return to work. Bringing people back to work to recover has a range of positive impacts for the company and for its workers. In a company of 24 staff, the absence of one worker impacts the rest of the workforce. Small companies do not have the flexibility to redistribute an absent employee's work. Timely return to work has also reduced the company's recruitment costs. Finding replacement staff with specialised skills and an extensive work history can be difficult and expensive. Enabling workers to return to work after an injury also ensures workers enjoy increased job security and longevity in the organisation as their positions are retained.

“Good practice must become part of the culture”



 Tips and Tricks

Suggestions from Union Hydraulics to other organisations

**Keep Going**

If you need to get your health, safety and workers compensation issues under control just *“take your time, chip away at it”* and you will eventually start to see great results.

**Get help**

“Attend any training and meetings you have available to you and then bring back to the company what you have learnt and communicate back up to upper management, then work out how to engage the key players.” Get help and get everyone involved in your action plan for change.

**The simple things are often the best**

“Do up something brief and simple for the doctor to make a decision on because they don't have time”. A picture can tell a thousand words. Pictures of the work you do give people a window into your workplace. A simple body positions worksheet can show a doctor straight away what workers do and helps the doctor make a quick decision about whether a worker can return to work. So think about what you can do to help key players around you make decisions about returning people to work.

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Flush Unit

Worker health and wellbeing is paramount

Union Hydraulics believes that keeping workers engaged with the workplace after an injury aids psychological wellbeing and recovery. Staff engagement and recovery at work are key principles for Union Hydraulics, who ensure that company rehabilitation coordinators rapidly respond to any injury. This includes accompanying a worker injured at work (provided the worker is conformable with this support) to the doctor and using and using the 'Body Positions' handout to help identify suitable return to work duties.

At all points in the return to work process, Union Hydraulics ensures the worker is kept well informed. First, the process is explained to the worker and they are given a 'We Care We Prepare' toolkit. The toolkit includes return to work information, guidelines, body positions, a list of useful questions to ask the doctor, an authority to release return to work information, payment authority material and a WorkSafe poster promoting the reporting of injuries. The employer follows through with any assistance needed.

Positive, supportive and timely return to work practices may also prevent secondary psychological issues, unnecessary pressure on social support systems and

disengagement from the workforce. As identified by Union Hydraulics, positive return to work outcomes also assist with reducing lost time, recruitment and retraining costs and workers' compensation premium rates. Encouraging the reporting of incidents and injuries also enables the company to become aware of and work through any onsite issues that need to be immediately managed.

Union Hydraulics' practices highlight that effective communication and systems, combined with staff engagement, assists workers to feel in control of their own return to work. A worker injured at work commented: *"Having proactive people around me helped me feel better and made the process hassle free"*. Managers expressed the view that you should *"Treat people like you want to be treated"*.

References

SWA (2014). *The National Return to Work Survey: The Role of the Employer and the Workplace. Australia and New Zealand: 2013*. Published by Safe Work Australia. Accessed June 2014 from <http://www.safeworkaustralia.gov.au/sites/swa/about/publications/pages/rtw-survey-role-employer-workplace-2013>